

THE WORLD FANTASY AWARD, BRITISH FANTASY AWARD,  
AND INTERNATIONAL HORROR GUILD AWARD-WINNING SERIES



# THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF BEST NEW HORROR

MICHAEL BISHOP, RAMSEY CAMPBELL,  
CHRISTOPHER FOWLER, STEPHEN KING, NEIL GAIMAN,  
TANITH LEE, BRIAN LUMLEY AND MANY MORE



Edited by STEPHEN JONES

STEPHEN JONES lives in London, England. He is the winner of three World Fantasy Awards, four Horror Writers Association Bram Stoker Awards and three International Horror Guild Awards as well as being an eighteen-times recipient of the British Fantasy Award and a Hugo Award nominee. A former television producer/director and genre movie publicist and consultant (the first three *Hellraiser* movies, *Night Life*, *Nightbreed*, *Split Second*, *Mind Ripper*, *Last Gasp* etc.), he is the co-editor of *Horror: 100 Best Books*, *Horror: Another 100 Best Books*, *The Best Horror from Fantasy Tales*, *Gaslight & Ghosts*, *Now We Are Sick*, H. P. Lovecraft's *Book of Horror*, *The Anthology of Fantasy & the Supernatural*, *Secret City: Strange Tales of London*, *Great Ghost Stories*, *Tales to Freeze the Blood: More Great Ghost Stories* and the *Dark Terrors*, *Dark Voices* and *Fantasy Tales* series. He has written *Coraline: A Visual Companion*, *Stardust: The Visual Companion*, *Creepshows: The Illustrated Stephen King Movie Guide*, *The Essential Monster Movie Guide*, *The Illustrated Vampire Movie Guide*, *The Illustrated Dinosaur Movie Guide*, *The Illustrated Frankenstein Movie Guide* and *The Illustrated Werewolf Movie Guide*, and compiled *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* series, *The Mammoth Book of Terror*, *The Mammoth Book of Vampires*, *The Mammoth Book of Zombies*, *The Mammoth Book of Werewolves*, *The Mammoth Book of Frankenstein*, *The Mammoth Book of Dracula*, *The Mammoth Book of Vampire Stories By Women*, *The Mammoth Book of New Terror*, *The Mammoth Book of Monsters*, *Shadows Over Innsmouth*, *Weird Shadows Over Innsmouth*, *Dark Detectives*, *Dancing with the Dark*, *Dark of the Night*, *White of the Moon*, *Keep Out the Night*, *By Moonlight Only*, *Don't Turn Out the Light*, H. P. Lovecraft's *Book of the Supernatural*, *Travellers in Darkness*, *Summer Chills*, *Exorcisms and Ecstasies* by Karl Edward Wagner, *The Vampire Stories of R. Chetwynd-Hayes*, *Phantoms and Fiends and Frights and Fancies* by R. Chetwynd-Hayes, *James Herbert: By Horror Haunted*, *Basil Copper: A Life in Books*, *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H. P. Lovecraft*, *The Complete Chronicles of Conan* and *Conan's Brethren* by Robert E. Howard, *The Emperor of Dreams: The Lost Worlds of Clark Ashton Smith*, *Sea-Kings of Mars and Otherworldly Stories* by Leigh Brackett, *The Mark of the Beast and Other Fantastical Tales* by Rudyard Kipling, *Clive Barker's A-Z of Horror*, *Clive Barker's Shadows in Eden*, *Clive Barker's The Nightbreed Chronicles* and the *Hellraiser Chronicles*. A Guest of Honour at the 2002 World Fantasy Convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the 2004 World Horror Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, he has been a guest lecturer at UCLA in California and London's Kingston University and St. Mary's University College. You can visit his website at [www.stephenjoneseditor.com](http://www.stephenjoneseditor.com)

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THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF  
BEST NEW  
HORROR

**VOLUME TWENTY**

Edited and with an Introduction by  
**STEPHEN JONES**



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# PETER CROWTHER

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## Front-Page McGuffin and The Greatest Story Never Told

MORE THAN ANY other comparison, Peter Crowther can best be described as the contemporary August Derleth. A multiple award-winning editor, novelist and now – with the highly respected PS imprint – publisher, Crowther has edited twenty anthologies (plus more than eighteen volumes of the acclaimed *PostScripts*) and is the author of more than 120 stories and novellas.

He has also written the novel *Escardy Gap* (with James Lovegrove) and recently started work on the fourth volume of his *Forever Twilight* SF/horror cycle. His work has been adapted for television in both the UK and the US.

Crowther lives on the Yorkshire coast of England with his wife, Nicky, and an unfeasibly large collection of books, magazines, comics, DVDs and CDs . . .

As he recalls: “When I was working on *Narrow Houses*, my first anthology, and the two subsequent volumes (*Touch Wood* and *Blue Motel*), all of them on the theme of superstition, I desperately wanted to try my hand at a superstition story myself . . .

“Heck, I had plenty of ideas – I had suggested most of them in the anthology’s commissioning letter. But, in the end, the idea I *did* decide to work on turned into *Escardy Gap*, and time just kind of ran away from me.

“By the time *Gap* was done, I’d forgotten all about it. Many years later, having created my New York watering hole The Land at the End of the Working Day, I had an idea about a guy who had died but was stuck on Earth . . . desperate to see his departed wife again. And I figured the reason he’d become that way was because the surfeit of

talismanic gestures and portents that he had employed while looking after his sick wife. But, despite his ministrations, she had died anyway . . . while, somehow, his karma or id or whatever had been destabilized.

“Like all of the Working Day stories – there are four of them, plus umpteen one-, two- and several-page outlines – it pretty much wrote itself, with me just hanging on there for dear life and hitting the keypad every now and again. It features one of my favourite characters – I’ll let you figure out which one it is.”

**I**T’S NOT ALWAYS AS EASY as you’d think to tell dead folks from those that are still alive, and certainly not by where you happen to find them. Or where they happen to find *you*.

Take now, for instance.

And *here*.

It’s a Tuesday in The Land at the End of the Working Day, a Tuesday Happy Hour, that no-man’s land between afternoon and evening, when the drinks are half the regular price and the conversation is slow. But then the people who come in to the Working Day specifically for Happy Hour, no matter what day of the week it is, don’t come in to talk.

The conversationalists of Manhattan (of whom there are many) don’t bother with the hard-to-find watering holes tucked into the street corners and tenement walk-downs; they concentrate instead on the gaudily-coloured window-painted bars on the main drags, the bars with the striped awnings and the piped music spilling out past the muscled doormen with their emotionless stares, out onto sidewalks littered with people looking in and wondering if – *wishing*, maybe – they could be a part of that scene.

There is no scene in The Land at the End of the Working Day. Not as such, anyways.

And there is no piped music here. Only the soft strains of one of Jack Fedogan’s jazz CDs wafting in and out of hearing the way trains and car-horns Doppler in and out of existence as first they approach you and then they pass you by, going on someplace else.

Tuesday, a little after 6:00 pm, and Oliver Nelson’s “Stolen Moments” is lazily washing around Jack Fedogan’s bar, Freddie Hubbard’s lilting trumpet solo making conversation unnecessary even if it were desired. Just a lot of introspective folks nursing Manhattans and Screwdrivers and Harvey Wallbangers and Sours,

sitting staring into the mirror behind the bar, occasionally chomping on an olive or pulling on a cigarette, nervously flicking ash into a tray even before it's formed, sometimes going with the music by tapping a foot on the bar-rail or a hand on the bar itself, thinking of the day that's done or maybe the day that's still to come. Another one in an endless parade of days stretching out through the weeks and the months, the seasons and the years.

They look into that mirror like it's the font of all knowledge. Like the silvered glass is going to tell them what's wrong and how to put it right.

Every few minutes, one or another of the guys shucks the shirt-ends free of his jacket sleeves, picks lint-balls from his pants and pulls them up at the knees to keep the creases fresh, occasionally waving to the ever-watchful Jack to pour another whatever, some of these guys lost – or appearing to be lost – in the headlines of the *Times* or *USA Today*, but mostly the headlines on the sports pages.

The women in the booths along the back wall cross their legs first one way and then the other, sometimes checking in their purses for something though these checks always end without their pulling anything out. And then they just sit, staring into space or maybe glancing across at the bar while they light another cigarette, wafting the match out and tossing it in the tray in a kind of subconscious synchronized motion with the music.

For those who don't know it, The Land at the End of the Working Day is a walk-down bar in the greatest city in the world, New York City.

It's a Tuesday and Tuesdays here are quiet.

Most everyone here tonight knows everyone else. Not by name, nor by job nor by relations nor even by what they each like or what they don't like. They know each other by the lines on their faces and the depth of their sighs. These are the irregular regulars or maybe the regular irregulars, exchanging nods and pinched smiles like they were passing out on the street. They know what they're here for and it isn't company.

They're here to drink.

They're here to forget.

And a few are here to remember.

But there's also a nucleus of *regular* regulars, folks who *do* know each other's name. Usually, these guys – they're mostly guys – sit together at one or another end of the bar, clustered around the soda and beer taps and always within reaching distance of one of Jack's

bowls of pretzels and nuts. But not in the great misnomer that is Happy Hour.

There's nothing particularly happy about Happy Hour.

Come 7:00, 7:30 pm at the outside, the place will start filling up. Folks will come in as couples, some married and some not but all of them comfortable with each other's company. And, generally speaking, all of them comfortable with life itself. They'll come in before going to a show or before going for a meal. Some of them will even come in to make a night of it, to get lost in conversation. And laughter and talk will fight for position with Jack Fedogan's CDs and the result will be a curious but entirely right amalgam of energy and sound and excitement.

But not now.

Now it's a little before 6:20. The heart of Happy Hour.

At this time, the regular regulars usually sit at the tables between the booths and the bar, conversation low and intense. Like a hospital waiting room.

There's only two tables filled tonight.

The table tucked in behind the bar close to the back wall has one man sitting at it. One man and a pack of playing cards. He's turning the cards over one by one, placing some on one pile and some on another. Every once in a while, he starts another pile by placing a card away from the others and then leaves it alone, putting cards on the other piles. For anyone watching, any casual observer, there wouldn't seem to be any rhyme or reason for the way he's turning those cards. But what do casual observers know about another man's chosen path in life?

This man is dressed in black – shirt, jacket and pants; the shirt buttoned right up to the neck but with no necktie – and he slouches back in his chair, a glass and a pitcher of beer on the table amidst the piles of playing cards. His eyes are hooded, bushy-browed, his face is thin – some might say “gaunt” or “drawn” – and he sports a small, neatly-clipped goatee beard which covers the tip of his chin and not a lot else.

This man is Artie Williams, sometimes known as “Bills” and others as “Dealer”. He is something of a communicator, his head filled with numbers and probability percentages and ratios. There are those who say he has a direct line to the world beyond the rain-slicked streets of Manhattan and far away from the leafy thoroughfares of Central Park: the world where the spirits roam. But where this reputation has sprung from nobody knows. Artie Williams keeps himself very much to himself. Like tonight, Happy Hour, turning

cards over on the table, drifting with the music, making piles and occasionally smiling to himself. And occasionally frowning.

The table midway between the stairs and the bar has three men sitting at it. One is Edgar Nornhoevan; another is Jim Leafman and the last of the three is McCoy Brewer.

They're talking about the condition of the subways right now. A little while ago, they were discussing the flow of traffic down Fifth. In a while, they may be talking about what kind of winter they're going to have this year. It's the middle of September now and the weather is a big consideration in New York, particularly after the excesses of the previous winter.

These men are what you might call real friends.

They can talk deep-down personal stuff – like Jim's wife Clarice cheating on him or Edgar's prostate problems or McCoy being laid off from his job with the Savings and Loan company – or they can talk controversial stuff like religion or life after death or abortion rights, but that isn't always necessary. Like tonight. And the truth is that only real friends can discuss trivialities with the level of intent and interest that Jim, Edgar and McCoy are displaying right now.

But that conversation about the subways will be interrupted in just a minute. And it won't drift into the weather. At least not tonight.

For tonight, the City will be sending to The Land at the End of the Working Day one of its casualties for healing.

It does that sometimes.

The sound of shoes echoes through the bar, shoes coming down the stairs. One guy at the bar stops tapping his hand for just a couple of seconds, the wink of an eye, and takes in this sudden intrusion. Then he goes back to tapping. An elderly man further down the bar mutters something to himself and then smiles into the mirror, gives a kind of half-chuckle and then reaches for his drink, running a finger down the iced-up side. The man he sees looks right back at him and returns the smile, runs a finger down his own glass.

Over in one of the booths, a woman in a red dress that's so red it looks like she just spilt berry juice all over it – looks like it should be dripping that redness onto Jack Fedogan's polished floor – she looks up for a second, drinking in the sight of the descending feet, then looks back at the glass she's twirling around the coaster on the table in front of her, the glass next to the pack of Marlboro Lights and matchbook, next to the ashtray with a collection of butts sitting in it that she is determined not to count. The feet don't mean anything to her. There's nobody knows she's here tonight. Nobody who even cares where she is, tonight or any night.

The truth is the feet don't mean anything to any of the irregular regulars.

But they mean something to Jim and McCoy and Edgar, and they stare at the line where the ceiling meets the diagonal stairs and watch as the owner of the feet comes fully into view.

As the feet get closer to the floor, walking strangely stiltedly on the stairs like one or both of them is favouring a broken shin-bone or a twisted ankle, these feet grow into legs and the legs grow into a waist and the waist turns into a full body and that, at last, leads into a head. The feet reach the floor and stop. The body sways slightly, like it has already had enough Happy Houring without looking for more, but the face on the head does not appear to be Happy Houred. Not at all.

The eyes are wide, wide but somehow not taking in what they're seeing, and the hair is mussed up and in bad need of a comb not to mention a razor and clippers. The sports coat hangs off of one shoulder, its sleeve obscuring the hand at the end of the arm it contains. The necktie is undone and hangs askew, the thin end flopped out over his sports coat lapel. The pants hang baggy around his crotch, no creases in them at all, the ends sitting crumpled up on mud-caked shoes whose laces are trailing untied on the floor.

"Hey," says Edgar Nornhoevan in a voice little louder than a whisper, "isn't that—"

"Front-Page McGuffin," says Jim Leafman, keeping his own voice low, nodding slowly.

McCoy Brewer keeps the nod going. "Sonofabitch, so it *is*," he says.

It won't surprise anyone to learn that Front-Page McGuffin's first name isn't really Front-Page, so it hardly seems like worth mentioning. But it kind of leads into other things that *are* important, so I will.

Front-Page McGuffin's first name is Archibald and the only other Archibald he ever *heard* of – he has never actually *known* any at all – is Cary Grant. And, as Front-Page is wont to remark at regular intervals – such as when someone introduces him to someone he doesn't already know (though there has never seemed to be many that ever fit *that* particular bill) as Archibald McGuffin, just for a joke kind of – *he* renamed himself. The fact that there are so few Archibalds says it all as far as Front-Page is concerned. And so he changed his name.

But, like it happens so often, the truth is slightly different. Front-Page didn't actually rename *himself*. It was done for him.

When A. D. McGuffin joined the *New York Times* back in the

1940s, he was sixteen – “too young to fight but old enough to cuss and make coffee,” is how he usually tells it. The guys in the *Times* newsroom called him Adie, making something almost tuneful out of the acronym of his initials, sometimes putting their hands on their hips in an effeminate manner and shouting across the hubbub clatter of ringing telephones and pounding typewriter keys, “Hey, Adie, howsabouta coffee over here?” And they’d laugh. They’d laugh every time, like it was a new joke that nobody had ever heard before.

Hank Vendermeer, the guy who employed Front-Page, didn’t make a big thing out of Front-Page’s reluctance to divulge his first name. At that time, Hank had got a boy out in the Pacific, a problem making the payments on his house, a meeting with the Editor in about ten minutes (for which he was decidedly unprepared) and a peptic ulcer that made him wince every time he burped up wind. The fact was, Hank Vendermeer couldn’t care diddly about names.

“What’s the ‘A’ for?” Hank Vendermeer asked at the time, suddenly thumping his chest with a hand shaped like a fleshy meathook into which a tiny pencil had been incongruously placed.

“Just ‘A,’” Front-Page responded.

“Okay.” Hank wrote it down. “And the ‘D’?”

“Just ‘D’,” said Front-Page.

Hank Vendermeer shrugged and wrote the ‘D’ alongside the ‘A’ on the sheet on the desk in front of him, then made a few ticks here and there. And that was that. “Okay,” he said. “You start tomorrow.”

Front-Page had a job.

The ‘D’ in Front-Page’s initials actually stood for Donald. But this seemed even worse to Front-Page than Archibald. Hell, the only Donald he’d ever heard of was a grumpy cartoon duck. No Thank You, Ma’am.

A. D. McGuffin worked hard and he learned fast and, pretty soon, he was making less coffee . . . though he was cussing more. At first, his daily routine pretty much consisted of schlepping copy around the various offices, doing a little typing, answering a few telephones, generally pinch-hitting around the floor. Then he got the chance to write up a piece on LaGuardia’s speech in Atlantic City, when the Mayor of New York agreed to head up the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, imploring Americans the country over not to overeat and not to waste. A. D. wrote a nice piece and made it onto page four. His first solo flight in print. “One day,” he told Sonny Vocello, “I’m gonna be on the front page.”

“Sure,” said Sonny, nodding his head. Hell, it was just a filler piece.

"Well, I am," said A. D.

"Sure," said Sonny Vocello. "We gonna have to call you *Front-Page McGuffin*." And he laughed, calling it out to anyone near enough to respond.

A. D. smiled and went along with the gag. But it made him even more determined to succeed.

A. D. didn't officially earn this sobriquet until December 1954 when he reported on the censure of the senator from Wisconsin for what the Senate called "four years of abuse of his colleagues". A week later, albeit in smaller print and in a keylined box in the bottom right corner, A. D. got his second front page story when Papa Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for his sparingly written story of an old fisherman who just refused to give up.

From then on, Front-Page McGuffin got a lot of lead stories and he just stuck with the name.

He retired from the *Times* in 1991 at the not-so-tender age of sixty-five. He was happy to be leaving it all behind, even though he still yearned for those years when newspaper reporting meant something more. But, he still had his wife, Betty, and he intended to write a book, a kind of memoir of the post-war years when everyone had a mental eye on the nuclear clock, watching its hands tick around to Armageddon.

He had his friends, too.

And his favourite watering hole, a two-flight walk-down that had just opened up a couple of years earlier on the corner of 23rd and Fifth, where he had met people who seemed real and where folks off the street just didn't seem to come. He made some *new* friends there, too, at a time of life when a guy couldn't really expect to make new friends but just to sit around and lose the ones he already had.

That last part was true enough for Front-Page McGuffin.

Cancers took a half-dozen of them in only half as many years, cut them down in their prime, wasting them to skin and bones and puckering up their mouths into thin-lipped sad little smiles. Bobby DuBarr, who could make a pool cue ball near on sit up and bark like a dog; Jimmy Frommer, who taught Front-Page all there was to know about subjunctive clauses; even Lester "Dawdle" O'Rourke, Front-Page's friend of friends, who was always late for everything, even the punchline of a joke . . . all of them went that way, eaten up from the inside like wormy apples, their skins yellow-white like old parchment and their ankles blown up over the sides of their house shoes because of all the steroids they were taking.

Heart attacks took another couple – Jack Blonstein, who had a singing voice that the angels would love, and Nick Diamanetti, who knew every joke that had ever existed (or so it seemed) – Front-Page watching them slip away in quiet hospital rooms with a barrage of blipping machines and suspended drips fixed onto scrawny arms.

A traffic accident took one of his best friends, a car crash up in Vermont where Bill Berison and his wife, Jenny had gone to see the fall colours on the trees. It had been something Bill had always planned to do.

Then, on New Year's Eve of 1994, in a lonely hospital ward in the South Bronx, Betty McGuffin gave in to the cancer that roiled inside her, slipping regretfully away from Front-Page into the waiting bedsheets, holding Front-Page's hand so tight he thought it would shatter and biting her lip to try to hold on another few minutes. To stay with him.

Thus, as millions of people celebrated the sudden movement of a clock-hand to midnight, the world ended for Front-Page McGuffin.

It didn't end with the cataclysmic explosion that Front-Page and his friends at the *Times* had been predicting in the 1950s and 60s, but with a sudden rush of silence that accentuated all of the minutiae of sound and colour that surrounded him.

He didn't remember getting home that night. Didn't remember getting into the suddenly wide and empty and lonely bed: it had been wide and empty for all of the nights that Betty had been in hospital but then Front-Page had been praying and hoping she'd come back. Now that he knew she would never be coming back, the bed was the loneliest place in the world.

The next night, he had been gone down to The Land at the End of the Working Day the way he'd gone down there to Jack Fedogan's bar most nights round about 6:30, for just a couple of drinks before going home to Betty and supper. Edgar Nornhoevan had been in that night, just like he was most nights, and Jim Leafman, too. Even McCoy Brewer came in, at around 10:00, armed with a passle of jokes that would have made even Nick Diamanetti smile.

Nobody mentioned Betty even once, but everyone bought Front-Page a drink and everyone gave his shoulder a squeeze. Once or twice, Edgar and Jim and McCoy saw Jack wiping his face with a towel, making out like the heat was getting to him, even though it was the first day of January and cold enough to freeze the spit as you swallowed it. Edgar, Jim and McCoy figured Jack Fedogan was thinking back about his own Phyllis and recognizing Front-Page's grief and his loss.

At a little after midnight, Front-Page made his farewells and stumbled up the stairs and out into the night. They never saw him again.

Not until tonight.

Three years later.

The three men at the table sit and stare.

Jack Fedogan stands and stares, the seemingly ever-present glass that he polishes held limply in one hand and the towel in the other.

Over behind them, Edgar, Jim and McCoy hear the sound of chair legs being pushed roughly across the floor. When they turn around they see Bills Williams standing up at his table and staring across at the new customer.

It's a night for staring, though none of the other patrons – the irregular Regulars – are paying any attention to Front-Page McGuffin.

"Hello," says Front-Page, like he's been here every night for months, but stammering the word and making it come out in a kind of croak.

Jack Fedogan leans on the bar and shakes his head. "Front-Page," he says, "Where you been hiding yourself?"

Front-Page McGuffin looks around like he's seeing the place for the first time, frowning and blinking his eyes. As they watch, Edgar, McCoy and Jim notice one of the eyelids seems to hang down longer, like it's got stuck on the way back. Front-Page lifts his left arm and starts swinging it towards his face, the fingers moving slow and robotic like the pick-up-a-prize machines out on Coney Island. Eventually, the hand gently connects with Front-Page's neck and then crawls – there's no other word for it – crawls its way up onto his chin and then around the cheek up to the eye socket where one of the fingers extends and pushes the lid up. Front-Page rubs at it, blinks a couple more times, and then drops the arm by his side.

"Not . . . well," says Front-Page, leaving a big space between the words. "How you guys?"

Edgar gets to his feet and moves to take Front-Page's hand, having to lift it up from the man's side first, and pumps it furiously but carefully. "Good to see you," he says, "been a long time."

"Long time," Front-Page echoes.

He looks to the other two men at the table and then walks across stiltedly, listing to the left at first until he whacks himself on the hip. This seems to cure the trouble and he makes it all the way to the table without further mishap. His co-ordination seems to have improved a little but it's still shaky, like he's not in control of his movements.

Front-Page takes hold of Jim Leafman's hand, shakes it and says, "Jim." Jim nods, returns the shake.

"How about that?" Edgar is saying to Jack Fedogan.

"Something's wrong," says Jack, keeping his voice low.

Over at the table, McCoy Brewer is reaching his hand across to Front-Page but Front-Page backs away, looking at it in a kind of blank-faced horror . . . a quiet desperation.

McCoy looks across at Jim and then over at Edgar and Jack. "What did I say?" he asks, but Front-Page is already making his way around the table. When he reaches McCoy, he leans forward and takes hold of McCoy's hand in both of his own and shakes it emphatically. "Bad luck," says Front-Page, shaking his head slowly and uncertainly, looking like maybe he's already had a few Happy Hours of his own before hitting the Working Day.

McCoy pulls his hand back from Front-Page, who seems momentarily unable to detach himself, and flexes the fingers and then rubs it in his other hand. "Jeez," says McCoy, "must be cold out there."

Jim moves across and puts an arm around Front-Page's shoulder. "You okay?" He pulls a chair across from a nearby table. "You want to sit down?"

Front-Page moves his head slowly and jerkily to face Jim Leafman. His eyes are all white for a second and then the pupils slide slowly down. "Not well," he says.

Jim helps him to the chair and Front-Page drops onto the seat.

Bills Williams moves over to stand by the table. Jim and McCoy look at him and shrug.

"How you doing, wordsmith?" says Bills.

Front-Page shakes his head. "Not well," he says, the words sticking partway out.

McCoy and Jim take their seats and pull their chairs into the table. Edgar says to Jack Fedogan to bring over a pitcher of beer and four glasses. When he sees Bills Williams pulling another chair across, he tells Jack to make that five glasses.

Over at the table, McCoy asks what was bad luck.

"Bad luck," Front-Page agrees enthusiastically.

"No," McCoy says, raising his voice like he's talking to someone who speaks a different language to the one *he* uses, separating out the words. "What. Did. You. Mean. About. Bad. Luck. When. You. Shook. My. Hand?"

Front-Page nods. "Bad luck." And then he leans forward, raps the table with his knuckles, puts his head on his arm and commences to let out the most fearful noise.

"He's really lost the plot," McCoy Brewer observes.

Edgar Nornhoevan looks down at his hands and notes, with some surprise, that they're shaking. "I'm not even sure he recognized me . . . or any of us," he says, more to himself than to anyone else.

Jim Leafman taps Edgar on the shoulder and nods in the direction of Front-Page McGuffin. "He having some kind of attack?"

"He's crying," Bills Williams says quietly.

"Crying?" says McCoy. "That's *crying*?"

The sound that the one-time star reporter of the *New York Times* is making is a noise that's a little bit like nails being dragged across a blackboard, a little bit like the busted air conditioning in Edgar's apartment, and a little bit like the whine of the loose fan-belt on Jim Leafman's aged Plymouth. And with every new expulsion, Front-Page's back arches like a mad cat.

Bills reaches across and takes hold of Front-Page's hand, raises his eyebrows. Then he shifts his hold to the wrist.

"He's cold isn't he?" says McCoy. "He's one sick man."

"He's worse than that," says Bills.

Edgar frowns. "What's worse than being sick?" he asks.

Front-Page lifts his head and that eyelid has stuck down again. He lifts his hand and adjusts it, this time a little easier. "I do . . . I do remember you guys," he says, the words sticking here and there, coming out croaked, and then raps the table with his knuckles.

"You eating, Front-Page? You gotta eat you know," says Edgar, sounding like he's talking to a child. "Keeps your strength up."

"Not hungry," says Front-Page, rapping his knuckles on the table again.

"Ask him when he last ate something?" Jim whispers to Edgar.

"Two weeks, maybe three," says Front-Page without waiting for Edgar to pass on the question. He raps his knuckles again. "Don't remember. Just remember the pain."

Edgar says, "Pain?"

Front-Page slaps a hand heavily against his chest. "Pain," he says, "right here. Fell over in the street . . . down near Battery Park. Late night. Nobody around." He pauses and makes a wheezing sound. When he speaks again, the lips barely come apart, cracked and discoloured. "Just lay there for a time. Thinking of Betty."

"Oh God," Edgar says, hanging his head.

"Then what happened?" asks Bills.

"Pain went away. Got up . . . went somewhere."

"Where'd you go, Front-Page? Did you go home?"

Front-Page looks at Jim and tries to shrug. "Doanmumber."

"He doesn't remember," Bills translates for the frowning Edgar. He hands his glass of beer to Front-Page and watches him take a long slug.

Jack Fedogan strolls across and places the pitcher of frothy beer on the table, puts a glass in front of each person. "How's he doing?"

"Not good," says Edgar.

"He's worse than not good," says Bills. "He's dead."

Nobody speaks.

Front-Page looks from one wide-eyed face to another while in the background, from Jack Fedogan's bar speakers, Ellis and Branford Marsalis play a haunting version of "Maria".

"I think," says Front-Page, "he's right." The words come out straighter and coherent and he looks as surprised at that as everyone else looks as a result of Bills Williams's revelation. "It happens sometimes," Front-page says. He gives the table a single knock with his knuckles.

"It happens sometimes that people die and walk into a bar to see their old friends?" Edgar says, his voice getting higher with each word.

Front-Page shakes his head. "My voice," he says. "Sometimes it sounds almost normal. The beer helps."

"But, yes, Edgar, it does happen sometimes that people walk around after they've . . . *passed on*," Bills says. "I seen it once before, down in New Orleans." He reaches across to Front-Page's open shirt-neck, pulls a silver chain there until he exposes a circular medallion depicting an old man carrying someone on his shoulders. "Saint Christopher," Bills says.

"Who's he?" asks Jim Leafman.

"Patron Saint of travellers," Front-Page says. "Protects anyone on the road . . . looks after them."

"Why did you not shake McCoy's hand?" Bills asks. "When you came over to the table."

"Bad luck to shake hands across a table," Front-Page answers. "Everyone knows that." He looks around at the blank faces. "Don't they?"

"Why'd you keep rapping the table," Edgar asks, making it sound like he already knows the answer.

"Knocking wood," Front-Page says. "Keeps from tempting fate."

McCoy Brewer says, "Keeps from tempting fate to do what?"

Front-Page shrugs. "From exercising irony. You say something is this way – the way you want it to be – then you knock wood to make sure it keeps on being that way."

"You very superstitious?" Bills asks.

Front-Page seems to be settling into his chair more now, though he keeps flexing his mouth, opening it wide like he's in pain. "No more than the next guy," he says.

"Tell us about Betty," Bills says to him.

Front-Page McGuffin visibly winces. He closes his eyes and shakes his head slowly. "She's not here anymore, Bills . . . and I miss her. I surely do miss her."

"I know you do," Bills says. "Tell us about the time she was in the hospital. Is that when the superstitions started?"

"I guess so."

"What did you do?" Jack Fedogan asks, crouching down by the table. He's checked the counter to make sure nobody's waiting for drinks. In the background, the Marsalis father-and-son team is playing "Sweet Lorraine".

"She had a tumour."

"I know that," Bills says. "Tell us how the superstitions started."

"Number 13," Front-Page says. "They wanted to put her in Room 13. I remember now. That's when it started."

"You weren't superstitious before then?" Jim asks.

"They – the doctors – they told me wasn't anything going to help Betty now. Then this other one, nice guy, he puts his hand on my shoulder and he says to me, 'You can try praying.'" Front-Page leans onto the table, knocks it a couple of times, and continues.

"So I tell him I'm not a religious man. Wouldn't know how to even begin talking to God . . . even if I thought he *did* exist. And this guy, he looks at me with this sad smile, and he says to me, 'That's all you have now, Mr McGuffin. That's all your *wife* has.' He says to me, 'Whyn't you give it a try?'

"So, that night – the first night she was in hospital – I got down on my knees in the bedroom, right alongside her side of the bed, and I prayed. I cried like a baby – and that's something else I don't do – and I prayed." He raps the table and shifts his weight in the chair, looking like he's uncomfortable.

"Next day, I go into the hospital and they tell me Betty's had a good night. But they tell me they're moving her into another room." He looks across at Bills and gives a single nod. "Room 13.

"I take it you're not superstitious, Mr McGuffin?" this nurse says to me, all sweetness and light. Anyway, I think to myself for a minute; and I think about how Betty has had a better night and how – maybe coincidentally, but hell, who knows? – how I did all that praying. And I wonder if maybe it *did* have an effect. And if it did, how maybe

I should try to avoid anything that could work against her. So I say to the nurse that I don't want Betty in Room 13."

"What did they say?"

Front-Page looks aside at Edgar and says, "They did it. They found her another room. They weren't *happy* about it, but they found her another room."

Edgar snorts a *Way to go!* snort, chuckles and pats Front-Page on the hand, which feels very cold just lying there on the table.

"Then," Front-Page says, sounding kind of tired, "everything started to get really intense."

"I went home and started to think about all the little superstitions and sayings folks use to get them through one day into the next. Totems and talismans they employed to keep them well and happy."

Suddenly remembering the pitcher, Jack gets to his feet and pours beer into the glasses.

Watching the beer froth up, Front-Page says, "I knew a few but I wondered how many there really were . . . wondered if I really went to town on these things that maybe Betty would be . . ." He lets his voice trail off and takes a long slug of beer.

"So," he says, setting the glass back on the table, "I went down to the library and I read up on them. You wouldn't believe how many books there are on superstition." He takes hold of the medallion about his neck and rubs it gently between his thumb and forefinger. "Got this from a book titled *Dictionary of Saints* by D. Attwater, 1965. Got another one from M. Trevelyan's *Folk-lore of Wales*, 1909."

"What was that one?" McCoy asks.

"That told how a posthumous child could charm away a tumour by putting his or her hands over the appropriate spot."

"What the hell's a—"

"It's a child born after its mother has died," Bills Williams says to Jack Fedogan.

"You found one of these . . . posthumous children?" Edgar says.

Front-Page nods. "Guy in the newsroom knew somebody." He waves his hand. "You don't want to know the details. It's a depressing story. Anyway, he arranges for this guy's daughter to visit Betty with me." There's a strange sound from Front-Page's throat that could be a chuckle, although there's no sign of amusement on his face. "Betty didn't know what the hell was going on – she was in a lot of pain, mind you. So I kept her talking while this girl – she was a woman actually . . . the tragic events surrounding her birth having taken place some time ago – she rubs Betty's stomach.

"And, you know . . . I think it helped her. Course, it could just've been the rubbing that helped but I didn't think so. Anyway, I wasn't taking any chances. So the girl came with me to the hospital another couple of times and then she didn't want to come any more. I can't say as how I blamed her. Hospitals can be downbeat places at the best of times and I was bad company to go with."

McCoy takes a slug of beer and rests his glass on the table. "So what did you do then?"

"By this time I had gotten so many of these folk-stories, sayings, homilies, and who knows what else that I was taking a whole bunch of stuff in there every day . . . and I was visiting with Betty morning, afternoon and evening, each time with something else to slip under her pillow or in her bedside cabinet."

"Things like what?" Jim asks.

"Oh, good luck coins – pennies with her year of birth printed on them – taped-up saltpot, a model of a black cat, piece of wood from an altar, rabbit's foot . . . there were so many I kind of lost track what I was doing there for a while." Front-Page shakes his head and altar the table. "And I had started doing things by myself, too."

Jack is back down on the floor and he shifts his weight from one knee to the other. "Like what?" he asks.

"Knocking wood all the time," he says, rapping the table to demonstrate, even though no demonstration was necessary, "spitting when I saw the back of a mail-van, spinning around when I inadvertently walked across cracks in paving stones, moving one hand in an arc to join the other hand when I saw a nun or a priest – you'd be surprised how many nuns and priests you see when you're doing this kind of stuff."

"It's a wonder they didn't lock you up," Jim observes and then winces when Edgar kicks him in the shin.

"That's okay," Front-Page says, and he raps the table just to make sure.

"But Betty . . . Betty didn't make it," he says quietly.

There's a world of regret in that simple statement and, even though Front-Page's voice is low, the two guys at the bar look around, just for a second, not knowing why they're looking around but simply responding to the sudden sense of loss that permeates the bar and mingles with the sound of Art Pepper's alto on "Why Are We Afraid?".

Edgar and McCoy and Bills and Jack and Jim just sit there, taking it in turns to nod, Edgar and Bills squeezing Front-Page's shoulders.

Front-Page shakes his head. "By then, I was too heavily into this stuff to back off. Even tried to change her burial day."

"Why?" asks Jack

"I read that, in County Cork in Ireland, it's bad luck to be buried on a Monday and that's when . . . when Betty was scheduled. They wouldn't change it. Said that it wasn't as simple as just changing days. I was devastated. There was a whole lot of spitting and knocking and turning the night after I found out, I can tell you that for nothing! But then I read someplace else that it was okay to be buried on a Monday so long as at least one sod was turned on the grave-site a day or two beforehand. So I went down to Lawnswood and dug over a small section. Then I was . . . heh, I was going to say *happy* – I was *placated*."

"How come you never told us any of this?" Edgar asks. "We saw you the night after Betty died and you seemed . . . well, you seemed normal. I mean, you were upset – hell, that was obvious – but I didn't know about any of this other stuff." He turns to the others. "Anyone know about this?"

There were several shakes of heads and a few grunted "No's".

"Well, I'm pleased to hear that," Front-Page says. "I tried to keep it to myself . . . though I'm pleased that nobody happened to see me when I could see a nun!"

Sometimes it happens that a conversation just naturally takes a pause and this one does right here. A time to take a drink and to watch the guy at the bar throw a couple of bills on the counter before making his way to the stairs and up to the waiting streets of New York; a time to nod to the music, like you were listening to it all along; a time to take a drink.

"So," Jack Fedogan says, his voice kind of lilting, phrasing the question like he's asking what Front-Page thinks to the new album by Jimmy Smith, "what took you down to Battery Park?"

"Just walking," comes the reply. "I spent the past three years just walking . . . walking and thinking . . . and rapping, and spitting, and turning, and who knows what else. And I just fell right over, felt like a truck ran over my chest. Then I got up. Went somewhere . . . like I say, I don't remember. Wasn't until a couple of days later, after I'd stopped eating and sleeping and drinking, I felt for my pulse and there wasn't one. Put my hand on my chest—" He puts his hand on his chest to demonstrate. "—No heartbeat."

Front-Page opens his mouth wide. The inside is grey and dry and, just for a second, before he turns his head away, Jim Leafman thinks he sees something wriggle across the back of Front-Page's mouth,

down near the top of the throat. "No saliva," Front-Page explains. "Gets so I can hardly open my mouth sometimes. The drink helps though . . . I think," he says as he takes a slug of beer and swishes it around his mouth, then swallows.

"So why'd you come here?" Jack asks. "I mean, why'd you wait until tonight?"

"Well, for a time there, I didn't want to see anybody who would remind me of what I had and don't have any more. Kept myself to myself. Lived out on the streets . . . down in the subway tunnels sometime. Met some strange people. Met some nice people, too. It's like I say, there's good and bad everywhere."

"Then, when I'd . . . you know; when I'd died . . . I met this guy in an alley and I told him pretty much everything I just told you guys. And he says – after we'd established the fact that I *was* dead . . . and he was mighty surprised at *that*, I can tell you – he says maybe I need to do it again."

"Huh?" says Jim, a thin trickle of beer dribbling down his chin. "Do it again? Do *what* again?"

"Die."

The five men stare at Front-Page McGuffin wondering if they heard him right.

"He says to me – this guy I met – he says that maybe, every once in a while, it doesn't take the first time and I need to do it again. So—"

Edgar Nornhoevan shakes his head and pushes his chair back. "Hey, do I want to hear this?"

"No," says Front-Page. "It's okay. Really.

"So, we think of ways I can do it. He says, why don't I throw myself under a car or onto the subway under a train. Now I don't want to do that because it'll maybe mess up the driver of that car or train. But I say, yes, I'll try the subway track because it's electrified, but only when the train has been through."

"So we go down onto 42nd Street, buy the token, the whole business, and we wait until a train comes through. Then when it leaves, I climb down onto the track and lie against the third rail. Nothing happens. I mean, I took hold of that thing and there was nothing. By the time I'm climbing out, commuters are coming onto the platform for the next train. They look at me and the other guy like we're scum of the earth and we high-tail it out of there as quickly as we can, with folks shouting after us, calling us names."

"So then he suggests I go up somewhere high and jump down. This sounds like a good idea to him – I mean, what could be more final, right? – but I always had this fear of heights and, well, I just couldn't

do it. And another thing was that if it didn't work, and I was still conscious but with every bone in my body mashed to pulp, I wouldn't even be able to get around.

"So I say how's about I drown myself. He thinks this is a good idea.

"We go up to Central Park – out to the lake? – and I wade on out into the water, which I have no sensation of, incidentally, and I keep walking until it covers my head. And I keep on walking. Then I just stand there, looking up through the water at the stars twinkling up there in the sky. I can hear this other guy shouting to me – a kind of half-shout, half-whisper . . . because it's late at night, you know, and the muggers are out – he's shouting asking me if I'm okay. And I'm trying to answer him. There I am, in ten feet of water, trying to talk. I stayed there for about fifteen minutes and then came out."

Front-Page shakes his head and takes a slug of beer.

Edgar suddenly notices that beer is dripping onto the floor from Front-Page's chair but he doesn't say anything.

Shrugging, Front-Page says, "And I tried other things. Hanging myself. No good. I think it broke my neck, which is maybe why I have trouble swallowing, but it didn't do anything else. I only thank God that I did it with this other guy near at hand. I mean, I just kicked away a wastebasket – we were in the Park again, under cover of darkness – and swung there from the branch of this tree. I felt fine . . . well, I felt no different. If he hadn't have been there, I'd have been found in the morning, still swinging there, still trying to talk and ask someone to please get me down.

"Then I tried poison. You see, I was trying things that, if they didn't work, wouldn't make me look any different than the way I always look. I mean, if I'd tried fire, then I may have burned all my body into a blackened mass which I would still maybe have to walk around with."

Front-Page shakes his head again and knocks wood.

"Then this guy, he says maybe he's not the one to give me any advice. He means by this, maybe nobody *alive* can give me advice on this one. So I ask him what he means by this. And he says I should think about trying to speak to somebody who's already dead."

At this point, Front-Page McGuffin turns to Bills Williams and says, "I want you to help me talk to Dawdle O'Rourke."

Without saying a word, Jack Fedogan gets to his feet and walks over to the counter. A couple of minutes later he comes back to the lilting piano of Herbie Hancock playing "My Funny Valentine", carrying another pitcher of beer. Nobody has said anything while

he's been away, like it was some kind of performance which couldn't continue while one of the actors was taking a leak.

Jack pulls over a chair and sits down at the table, setting the pitcher next to the empty one. "This should be bourbon," he says. To which Edgar gives a short snigger and then does the honours of freshening everyone's glass.

"Can you do it, Bills?" McCoy asks.

Bills nods and looks down at the playing cards in his hands. "I can try," he says. "But are you sure Dawdle is the one? You don't want me to call on Betty instead?"

"Uh uh," says Front-Page. "She'd worry. I mean, I should be up there – or 'out' there . . . or wherever the hell '*there*' is – and the fact that I'm not with her will mean I must still be alive. If she knew all this was happening, she'd worry. It has to be Dawdle. Dawdle and me go way back. If he can't help me, then nobody can. I know I can trust him not to say anything to anyone else . . . mainly to Betty. He's the only one. I love the others but they'd think they were doing me a favour by speaking to Betty. I can't take that chance."

Only Herbie Hancock has anything to say after that, and he's doing his talking with his piano.

After a while, Front-Page says to Bills, "Will you do it?"

Bills nods. "I'll do it."

As they're preparing one of the tables over near the wall, Jack Fedogan is going around telling the other folks that he's closing up for the night, closing up early. It's a credit to him and the Working Day itself that the other patrons accept this as just the way things are. They leave with smiles and nods, pulling on scarves and overcoats as they prepare to venture up the wooden stairs and out into the January streets of Manhattan.

Pretty soon there's just the six of them.

Eleven if you count Coleman Hawkins, Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, Tommy Flanagan, Ron Carter and Gus Johnson, whose mellow "There Is No Greater Love" is wafting around the bar, filling the corners and all the nooks and crannies of The Land at the End of the Working Day, preserving the mystery of those hidden places while removing their threat.

Front-Page himself is not taking part in the preparations. He's sitting at the old table, the one near the bar, sitting by himself and occasionally looking up, looking around, and then looking back at his drink, sometimes taking a slug, the pool of beer around his chair widening all the while.

"All his insides are shot," Edgar explains to Jim Leafman as they

throw a green cloth over the designated table. "Liver, kidneys, heart, lungs, bowel, colon . . . all rotted to mush."

"Yeah?" says Jim, sneaking a glance across.

"It's what happens," Edgar says matter-of-factly. "Happens to us all." He pulls a face. "You catch the smell?"

Jim frowns and shakes his head.

"You should've been sitting next to him. Poor guy. Smells like an open sewer."

Bills Williams comes out of the bathroom with McCoy Brewer. "What he's done," he's saying to McCoy, "is mess up his natural forces with protective talismans and totems. Maybe it's the sheer number and frequency, maybe it's just the interaction of one or two . . . I don't know."

They stop at the table and look across at Front-Page.

"And in doing so, he's made it so that *he* . . . his soul, his id, his karma . . . whatever you want to call it – he's made it so that his very essence has been imprisoned. Maybe he was protecting himself – for a while anyways – from *external* influences, but he died from what sounds like a heart attack. It was an *internal* force that killed him. I don't think you can protect yourself from what's happening in your own body. Don't think you should even try." Bills gave a small smile, without humour. "We are born, we live and we die. That's the way it is . . . and that's the way it has to be. When Front-Page's time came and his body could no longer continue, his essence should have been free to go. We're going to do this thing – contact Dawdle O'Rourke – but I don't know as how it'll do any good."

"Okay, everybody ready?" says Jack Fedogan.

"As we'll ever be," says Bills. "Front-Page?"

The time of inaction seems to have taken its toll and Front-Page is once again moving with extreme difficulty. So much so that Jack and McCoy have to go over and help him to the new table.

When they are all seated evenly around the table, Bills starts to speak.

"Okay, here's the way it's going to work. We all link hands palm-down on the table. Nobody breaks the link, whatever happens. If this thing is going to work, it'll work right away. If it doesn't, then it isn't going to work. Okay?"

Everyone nods and grunts assent.

"No talking or sounds of any kind, okay?"

Without waiting for a response, Bills Williams takes a hold of McCoy's and Jack's hands and allows his head to fall forward onto his chest.

“Dawdle O’Rourke?” Bills says, his voice sounding deep and strange, sitting on the sound of Tommy Flanagan’s piano like a cork on an ocean. “Dawdle O’Rourke, I need to speak with you. A friend of yours needs your help. His name is Front-Page McGuffin. Please respond.”

They wait in silence.

After a couple of minutes, Bills repeats the message word for word. Still no response.

“Dawdle O’Rourke, you are urgently needed. This is Bills Williams in The Land at the End of the Working Day. *Please* respond.”

Front-Page tries to smile and pulls his hands away from Edgar and Jack. “It’s no good,” he says as he tries to pull his eyelid up. “It’s just not going to work.”

They all break their hand-holds.

Jack Fedogan leans forward on the table. “Hey,” says Jack, “you ever hear about those cases where folks lift automobiles off of kids who are trapped beneath . . . just regular scrawny people who suddenly have this amazing strength?”

“Yes?”

“Yep.”

“Uh huh?”

“Well,” says Jack, “why is that?”

“You think this is the time for—”

“No, Edgar, this could be important,” says Jack. “It’s the power of the mind, isn’t it? That’s what does it.”

“Yeah, that’s what they say on Cable TV, Jack,” says Edgar, “so what’s your point?”

“My point is . . .” He turns to look at Front-Page and sees his old friend’s wrecked face, sees the black rings around the eyes, pieces of lip that seem to be coming away – he never noticed those before – and tufts of hair that stand proud of the scalp which itself is going kind of blue and mottled, like hands that have been in water too long. And, taking hold of Front-Page’s hand again, he asks, “Do you trust me?”

The voice that comes back is deep and resonant, the voice on an old vinyl record that’s playing when the power cuts out on the player. “I trust you, Jack,” Front-Page says, and he blinks his eyes closed.

“Front-Page?” Edgar says.

“He’s gone,” says Bills.

“Where’s he gone?” says Jim. “He’s right there. Where could he—”

“Give me a hand with him,” Jack Fedogan says. He stands up and pulls Front-Page up to his feet by his arm. “Jeez, his arm!”

“What’s wrong with his arm?” asks McCoy.

Bills rushes around the table and takes hold of Front-Page McGuffin’s other arm, hoisting it around his own shoulder. “The muscles have atrophied,” he says. “Gone to mulch.”

Jim Leafman scowls. “Yeuch.”

Edgar kicks nudges him and says, “Shh!”

With Front-Page on his feet, but his eyes still closed, and his arms around Jack’s and Bills’s shoulders, Bills says, “What now?”

“Help me get him to the stairs.”

“Where you going?” asks Bills.

“Out.”

“Where out? It’s below zero out there,” says McCoy getting to his feet.

“I’m going to teach him the power of the mind,” says Jack.

“Wear your coat at least,” Jim shouts as Jack starts up the stairs, his arm around Front-Page’s waist.

“You want me to come with you?” says Bills.

“Uh uh.” Jack grunts. “He’s still carrying a weight.”

Bills Williams thinks Front-Page is carrying lots of things around with him, but he doesn’t say anything.

“I’ll be back,” Jack shouts, in his best Arnie impression. “Serve yourselves.”

Out on the street it’s cold.

It’s dark and there’s a wind blowing and snow’s in the air, though right now it’s trying to rain . . . but most of all it’s cold.

But somehow . . . it’s okay.

Sometimes the City carries its magic on the surface for all to see.

Right now, at a little before 9:00 pm, on a Tuesday evening after the longest Happy Hour in the brief history of Jack Fedogan’s Land at the End of the Working Day, the streets are empty of people. Jack looks along 23rd and then down Fifth and there’s not a single person to be seen. Not even any traffic.

Then, its tyres swishing along the rain-washed streets, a single Yellow cab turns the corner into Fifth just a block down and heads their way, its light glowing like a beacon in the darkness.

Jack hefts Front-Page up against him and waves his free arm. “Hey!” he yells into the gloom.

The cab pulls up alongside them, the cabby calls, “Get in.”

“Thanks.” Jack pulls open the door and manoeuvres Front-Page into the back seat. It smells of cheap perfume and cigarette smoke, for which Jack is grateful. His companion would not win any prizes in a sweet-smells competition.

“Where to?” the driver asks as Jack pulls the door closed.

“Central Park.”

“Where in Central Park, friend? It’s a big park.”

“Anywhere, but quickly.” He pushes a rolled-up twenty through the grill.

“You got it,” comes the reply.

As they drive, Jack starts patting Front-Page’s face. “Front-Page,” he says, “can you hear me?”

“Hear you,” says Front-Page.

“Hang on in there, buddy,” says Jack. “Hang on in there.”

Front-Page lets rip with a fart. It sounds like material tearing.

“He okay?” the driver calls over his shoulder. “He gonna throw up, you tell me, okay?”

“It’s just wind,” Jack shouts. Then, to Front-Page, “Hang on, buddy.”

The driver lets them out on the corner of Central Park South and Fifth, seemingly relieved to have made the trip without his passengers redecorating the back seat.

Jack holds onto Front-Page, his shoulders hunched over at the biting cold wind, and watches the cab drive on up Fifth Avenue.

“Okay,” says Jack, “I want you to walk with me.”

“Where . . . going?” says Front-Page.

“We’re gonna sit ourselves down on a bench along here a ways and we’re gonna look up at the city.”

As they start to walk, Front-Page McGuffin says, “Nice.”

Maybe it’s something in the air, maybe it’s the promise of rain coming down as a fine spray, but Front-Page starts to improve as they move along and it doesn’t take as long as Jack thought it would to reach his destination.

Then they’re there.

A bench on one of the pathways that cross and re-cross Central Park. Over across from them as Jack lowers Front-Page onto the seat, they can see the buildings up Central Park West, their lights twinkling like fairy lights in the gloom.

“This is where Phyllis and me used to come,” says Jack Fedogan. He leans forward on his knees and looks up through the branches at the glittering lights. “We used to come here and make plans,” he says, either telling Front-Page McGuffin or simply reminding himself. If you were to ask him which one it was, he wouldn’t be able to tell you. Not for sure.

“You. Miss. Her?” Front-Page’s voice is stilted and echoing, hollow, more like the memory of voice than the voice itself.

"I miss her very much, my friend," says Jack. "And I look forward to seeing her again. But only when the time is right."

By his side, Front-Page nods. "Time. Is. Right," he says.

For a few seconds they sit in silence and then Jack says, "What I was saying back in the Working Day? About the power of the mind?"

Front-Page's head lolls on his neck.

Jack shakes his friend's arm and says it again.

"Yes?"

"You have that power."

Jack takes the single grunt to be an ironic laugh. "I have no power."

"Yes you *do*," Jack says. "Okay, you can't lift an auto right now . . . and maybe you couldn't even if Betty were here and lying right underneath. But you'd have a college try, am I right?"

Front-Page nods.

"So try."

"Wha— What? No. Auto. Here."

"Try to get to her, for Chrissakes. Just . . . just leave it all. Let it go!"

"How?"

"Your body is finished. It's *you* who've trapped yourself here . . . nobody else. You and all those dumb superstitions . . . all that spitting and rapping and twirling. You've got— Listen." Jack turns around and takes hold of Front-Page's jacket lapels. "If I could change places with you right now, I'd do it. You hear what I'm saying to you, Front-Page? If I could be as close to seeing Phyllis again as you are to seeing Betty, I'd change places right now. All you have to do is try."

"Try," says Front-Page. "Yes" Then, "How?"

"Just . . . just close your eyes and let it go. Don't fight it. Use that power of the mind that folks use to lift automobiles."

Front-Page McGuffin blinks at Jack Fedogan and then looks down at his friend's hands. "You. Can . . ."

Jack takes his hands away. "Sorry. Getting carried away there."

"S'okay," says Front-Page and he moves his head to face the twinkling lights on the buildings through the trees. "Quite. A. City," he says, his voice now sounding like a door rubbing on a piece of coal trapped beneath it. "New. York," he says.

Even the words themselves have a magical sound, Jack thinks. He rubs his shoulders and shivers. "You trying?"

"Trying," says Front-Page.

They sit like that for a few minutes, silent.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Something . . . You. Good. Man. Jack.”

“So they tell me.”

“Something. Happening.”

Jack Fedogan turns around and looks at his friend’s face. Is it his imagination or is it the light filtering through the trees . . . or does Front-Page look more peaceful now?

“Hold. Hand,” says Front-Page McGuffin. “Going.”

Jack takes hold of Front-Page’s hand and grips it tight, trying hard to let him feel the warmth. “Front-Page?” he whispers.

“Yessss . . . ?” Sleepy-sounding now.

“Tell Phyllis I said, ‘Hi.’”

Front-Page’s head lolls forward. And now there is just one person sitting on the bench in Central Park, breathing in the fine mist and watching the lights twinkling through the trees. Jack sits there for a while like that, his arm around Front-Page McGuffin’s shoulder and Front-Page’s head leaning against his own like a sleeping lover, just watching the city and listening to its sounds.

It takes Jack Fedogan almost two hours to walk back to The Land at the End of the Working Day. Two hours in which he has re-lived weeks and months and years of memories. When he arrives at the familiar entrance at the corner of 23rd and Fifth, it’s raining hard and Jack is already sniffing.

“Where you been?” Edgar says as Jack clumps down the stairs.  
“It’s almost midnight!”

“Where’s Front-Page?” asks McCoy Brewer.

“Right now?” says Jack. “Right now I’d say he’s catching up with someone he’s been missing for a long time.”

“Where’d you leave him?” asks Bills Williams.

Jack walks across to the counter and lifts the hatch. “In the park.”

Bills smiles. “And I bet I know where,” he says.

“Coffee anyone?” asks Jack. “It’s been a long—”

Suddenly the lights flicker.

A wind blows down the stairs and swirls around them, a wind so strong that the five of them shield their eyes.

Then, as quickly as it appeared, the wind drops.

The lights return to their full intensity.

And a solitary shimmering figure stands at the foot of the stairs.

“Someone call me?” asks Dawdle O’Rourke.

# SIMON STRANTZAS

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## It Runs Beneath the Surface

SIMON STRANTZAS WAS BORN in the harsh darkness of the Canadian winter over thirty years ago. He is the author of two short story collections – *Beneath the Surface* (Humdrumming, 2008) and *Cold to the Touch* (Tartarus, 2009) – and his work has not only appeared in such award-winning magazines as *Cemetery Dance* and *Post-Scripts*, but also in the previous volume of *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*.

He is currently working on a third collection of weird fiction; after which he plans to catch up on a voluminous amount of reading, and then perhaps begin work on a short novel.

“There is something about city life that fascinates me,” explains Strantzas. “I find myself musing to no end about the effect it has on its inhabitants. I know I’m not alone in that regard – some of the greatest examples of the urban supernatural are in the work of Fritz Leiber, especially in stories such as “Smoke Ghost” and “The Black Gondolier”. Both these tales no doubt infected my mind when I was dreaming up “It Runs Beneath the Surface”, but it was an inchoate mess until I chanced to hear a stray line from an unassuming pop song. Suddenly all my disparate thoughts coalesced and I knew exactly what the tale was about, what should happen in it and, most importantly, how it should end.

“On reflection, I’m particularly proud of the dot the final line puts on things.”

THE SUBWAY CAR PIERCED the darkness, rattling along its thin track and filled with faces carrying a burdensome weight. Pale,

sallow, as if the city had drained them, the passengers shook quietly, packed together in the tiny metal box.

Philip Kirk had managed to find a seat for the ride in but he regretted taking it once bodies filled the space around him and stole oxygen from his lungs. He adjusted his rumpled jacket, trying to alleviate its restrictiveness and find a few extra inches in which to move. The yellow lights of the car buzzed and flickered intermittently with every power surge, and they drew the shadows that confined him closer.

The jittering train came to a stop at Carlton Street Station. Philip peered through his window at the sullen people moving like automatons across the opposite platform. They seemed to have already conceded failure; it was in their stances, in the way they walked.

An eruption of movement caught his eye. A vagrant covered in grime ran erratically across the platform, clutching at himself, ripping his tangled beard and unkempt hair. He screamed, his mouth a dark and bottomless pit, but the noise was ineffectual; no one but Philip appeared to notice, and even then it was inaudible over the roar of the train unsteadily moving forward. The filthy man reached the end of the platform just as the train passed before him, and Philip only caught a glimpse of arms from the shadows stretching to catch the man.

When Philip finally arrived at the Eastside Mission he found he had the place to himself. He sat at his desk and ran wrinkled hands over case reports and worn files, re-reading the data that he had already memorized. The grey words of each report read the same: there was nothing more that could be done for any of them, no magic wand to be waved that assimilated his clients back into the world they left so long ago. No one wanted to bear the trouble. No one wanted to do anything but forget.

“Sorry,” Philip heard, and looked up to see Allan picking his blue topcoat free of lint before hanging it on the shared rack. “I had to make a stop.” Across the back of his pressed trouser leg was a large smear of mud. Philip noted it with suspicion but said nothing.

Clients arrived in a steady flow, their amorphous shadows darkening the translucent window to the waiting room. The two men took turns using the counselling room that sat through a door on the right wall, though Allan’s sessions often ran overlong. He was still enthralled by all the pains and troubles that flowed through his clients like darkened blood, but for Philip they were merely further evidence of a rotted world that tainted its cowed populace. At the end of every session he felt soaked through with despair and secretly he

envied Allan and the hopes the young man still held in his clear blue eyes.

Those eyes clouded, however, upon the conclusion of his afternoon session. Philip had observed Allan's new client but briefly, and – though he was perhaps less kempt than the rest – there was nothing beside his height that marked him as different. Even that wasn't very peculiar, yet Allan appeared disturbed.

"I've never spoken to someone that far gone before."

Philip's eyes did not move from his work. "How so?"

"What he said didn't make any *sense*. He just kept warning me about something. I'm not sure he ever told me about what."

"You'll get used to that," Philip said. "They all imagine some disaster is happening."

"I suppose." Allan trailed off, looking out the window for a long time. Philip noticed and turned, but saw only amassing rain clouds through the glass. Allan eventually excused himself, rubbing his eyes. By the time Philip finished with his last client Allan and his topcoat had already disappeared for the day. Philip left a short time later.

His ride home was not as cramped as the morning's commute, but even so an empty seat eluded him. He stood near the doors, looking for some respite from the crowd, and too late he realized the pole he grasped for support was soiled by a murky slick film. He was revolted by the filth that seeped from those around him and fouled everything they touched.

He scrubbed his hands raw once safe within his dingy apartment, watching the bowl of the sink tint pale brown as the world washed away from him, but nothing he did could remove the feel of grease that had crept between his fingers.

The lumps of his bed resisted his weight as he lay down, but he was far too tired to fight them. His head throbbed from exhaustion, and he closed his eyes to avoid seeing the walls he could not escape.

He dreamt of himself fixed to a seat at the end of an empty subway car, watching passing stations flicker in the windows like a silent film. Their light illuminated the entire car, exposing the mosaic of muddy footprints, thick and dark, that were scattered along its length. Murky shadows gathered at the opposite end of the car and Philip noticed wisps of movement within the darkness, like a black pool beginning to swirl. Two pseudopods gradually formed from the shadows, then grew larger and stretched across the floor towards him. He struggled, but his feet were caked in black muck and fused to the floor. The shapes formed a pair of figures that closed in as the subway sped faster. They raised their hands, their fingers

becoming long tendrils that crawled towards his face, and just as they made contact Philip found himself awake and panting in his own bed, his skin burning and covered with sweat.

Philip's first session ran long, and thus he was unaware of when precisely Allan arrived at work. The young man was simply there, sitting at his desk uncharacteristically withdrawn and contemplative, seemingly unaware of Philip until he spoke.

“You still have your coat on.”

Allan jumped in his seat, and then, after Philip repeated himself, looked at his blue topcoat.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” he said. “Listen, can I ask you something?” Philip shrugged.

“How do you do it? Deal with all of this day after day after day?”

“You'll get used to it. You're young.”

“I don't know. I keep thinking about everything the clients say. Sometimes I find myself lying awake at night thinking about it.”

Philip's nightmare subway sped through his thoughts. “You have to learn to forget it. Forget it all.”

Allan sat silent, weighing the words, his furrowed brow working them like a bone. Philip sighed and regretting what he was about to ask.

“Do you . . .” he said. “Do you really want to know how it works?”

Allan turned his desperate blue eyes to Philip, and the older man almost reconsidered.

“Everybody,” Philip said as he turned away, “starts this job thinking they'll make a difference. Yet no one does. All you'll be doing is passing time. At best, you'll help a few people to suppress their fears and pains and desires for a little while, but soon it will all come bubbling back up stronger than before. Your only job is to get them in and out with as much paperwork as possible.”

Allan sat stunned, as though Philip had reached in and twisted his soul.

“It's true. You'll see for yourself once you've been around a little longer.”

Allan sank, inspecting his hands and muttering in disbelief. Philip returned to his paperwork and pretended not to notice the young man's pain. Allan would have to make a choice: either accept it or burn out trying to change it. There wasn't a third option.

The ring of Allan's telephone interrupted the silence. He answered it and put the receiver to his ear. Then, after only a minute and

without saying a word, he hung it up again. In his hand he held his blazer, and it trailed behind him as he darted out of the office, the door closing firmly in his wake. His dark shape faded in the translucent window, and then rematerialized a moment later with another. The two shadows moved to the right and disappeared into the counselling room. Their mumbling soon penetrated the walls.

It was unlike Allan to act so secretively about a client, and Philip feared he had pushed him too far.

He approached the counselling room with care. He wanted to hear the session without betraying his presence. Allan's voice, dry and shaky, spoke only briefly, interrupting the fragments of babble delivered by his client.

"... can't keep . . . contained . . . oozing . . ."

"... liquid . . . fills my . . ."

"... hot . . . tar . . . do you understand?"

Philip took flight when he heard the sound of scraping chairs. He reached his desk just as Allan emerged from the counselling room, and realized immediately that he had forgotten to close the door between them. Philip could feel the error had been noticed, but he refused to acknowledge it.

Allan and his towering client stood in the waiting room and spoke quietly. Philip now recognized the man from the previous day, yet in that time he seemed to have acquired a year's worth of filth. His pants were torn completely away below his right knee, exposing a leg smeared with dark grime. His coat, too, held together only by dried stains, hung from his shoulders as though soaked through. From where Philip sat an odour, like ammonia, burnt his nostrils.

Finally, the tall man left. Allan still seemed agitated, wiping his hands repeatedly with a handkerchief. He took his seat, exhausted, eyes red and puffy as though he had just been crying. Philip felt awkward and discreetly left to fill his mug with water from the waiting room cooler. Once there, he saw the series of dirty footprints that made a trail across the carpet and into the hallway.

Familiar faces crowded the subway home, each passenger staring ahead with dull dark eyes as he or she passed the time without a word. Upon their collective sagging shoulders was borne the weight of all their troubles, and Philip felt the same heaviness as it coursed through his withering veins and wrapped around his soul.

Hidden among the sex-shops, his building stood squat and lifeless, its bricks stained by the filthy air. Soot clung to his hands as he

pushed through the entrance and he wiped them clean against the side of his trouser leg.

He discovered the broken light bulbs as he emerged from the stairwell. They left the entire corridor in darkness, yet what seemed to be his shadow remained cast on the wall at the opposite end, traced impossibly by the remaining lights behind him. He watched the uneven mass roll towards him as he approached his apartment. It seemed wrong somehow, as though it were actually growing as it advanced toward him. He stopped at his door, but for a moment thought the shadow continued, its movements slightly out of time with his own through some illusion of the lowered light. He felt a chill but he shook it off, and inserted his key into the lock.

He woke the next day with his head throbbing and his stomach burning its way into his throat. He struggled to the washroom and took a long drink from the rusted faucet, replacing one sour taste with another. His yellow, sagging face stared at him from the mirror, and with clarity knew that he had been forsaken. His hopes and dreams had been surreptitiously drained, leaving nothing but sorrow to fill the void. He stuck out his tongue and was horrified by the grey filmy protrusion.

Just above the reddish stubble that outlined his cheekbone he found the mark. Black, about an inch in length, it stretched further when Philip put his thumb to it, leaving a greasy smudge across his cheek that soap and water could not completely eliminate.

Philip stepped aboard the subway train amazed – it was barely half-full. The passengers there were pressed into the far end of the car. Between him and them lay the bulk of the seats, empty and coated in a brown viscous substance that infected the entire car with a foul stale odour he could not stand to breathe.

When the next stop arrived, he hurried off and stood gasping for air on the edge of the platform as he watched the subway train leave the station, the hazy shadows of its passengers fading into the darkness.

The platform was nearly as empty as the train. Only a few commuters were left along the narrow stretch of concrete, their faces weighted down, eyes cast blankly upward. Along the periphery, Philip saw shadows disappear quickly behind the commuters, those new arrivals looking for a place to stand. He could feel eyes from the small crowd upon him, but when he turned he saw nothing but blankness.

The next train could not arrive soon enough. When it did, he was relieved it was uncontaminated by the odour, though he found its

passengers gave him a wide berth. He sniffed his sleeve and coughed. His jacket smelled foul.

He aired it out as best he could at the office, but the odour proved too resilient. Just a whiff of it sent his stomach churning.

Allan's desk was vacant, his coat-hook bare. Philip frowned. The man was becoming increasingly tardy and unreliable.

Fortunately, Philip had no trouble handling things alone; his morning was devoid of clients. They simply failed to show up. Instead, he caught up on paperwork still pending. A fine drab mist covered the streets outside, making uneasy shadows of the obscured pedestrians.

Philip began to get fidgety by noon, his anger over Allan breaking his concentration. Unable to sit still any longer, he paced the room, growing more enraged by Allan's unexplained absence. He swung open the office door, half-expecting to see the young man there with an arm wrapped around the water cooler and acting as if he'd been at the office all along, but instead Philip found the waiting room empty. The door to the counsellor's room, however, was closed, and its tiny window was lit.

Within the room, pressed into the far corner, sat Allan's bearded client, dirty and bloodied knees pressed tightly to his chin. He shook as if with fever, head pressed sideways into the tatters of his blackened clothes, the grime of his face streaked with tears. He blubbered uncontrollably.

"Are you hurt?" Philip took a hesitant step forward.

The man's head turned, his one exposed eye bloodshot and filled with terror. The room became startlingly quiet. The entire left side of the man's face was covered in a thick oily mud that clogged his orifices and disguised what lay underneath. It caked his greying beard and stained his clothes and skin. Philip retreated to the door as the man scrambled to his feet, leaving marks across the wall while sounds gurgled from his fouled lips. He pushed past Philip, leaving a long smudge across the counsellor's chest, and Philip could do nothing but watch him escape. After he'd gone, Philip retreated to the office shaken, and sat quietly at his desk.

He'd never seen anything so bizarre and upsetting before. His hands shook and he placed them upon the desk hoping to steady them. Underneath his fingers, Allan's files stared up and the sight of them began to transform Philip's fear into anger. Where *was* Allan? Of all the days to skip work, he chose *this* day? Philip dialled Allan's home number and at the sound of the answering machine hung up. Loathing filled him.

He was relieved at the end of the day to find the train home nearly deserted as he wanted only solitude. He sat facing the front window, and watched the dark tunnel advancing upon him. Lights ran across the few passengers who sat like gargoyle, heads hung low, waiting for life to pour from their drooping mouths. Each door opening brought a glare that blinded them, and they squinted until their stop arrived. They then trudged with difficulty onto the cold platform, leaving Philip further alone.

He looked back through the rear window along the line of cars behind him. They all seemed empty, passengers having departed them one by one until only Philip remained. As his train took the turn at Union Station and Philip realized he was wrong: near the other end of the train, he saw the briefest shape of someone sitting. Immediately the figure was gone, hidden behind so many empty cars.

The distance between the penultimate stop and his own stretched for an eternity. When Philip stood to collect his things he noticed, upon his seat, a black gelatinous streak. He craned his head, looking for a stain upon his clothes and found it spread across his leg. Brushing only made it worse. He stepped from the car annoyed.

The train hurried off, leaving him in his filthy clothes alone on the platform. The exit was bathed in its orange light, and as he walked towards it a strange sound followed. Like the suction of a foot leaving mud, it repeated, echoing off the walls. He looked around but the platform was empty. The noise continued and he wondered if he was really alone, or if someone else had left the subway train while he was too preoccupied to notice. He looked back again, and then moved faster towards the orange stairwell.

Light spilled from it and flooded the blotched tiles. Philip saw illuminated a dark stream of footprints that curled around the concrete walls and into the stairwell. From the first stair he could just barely see the surface level above and the dark night that already clogged the sky. He climbed the stairs, anxious to escape the shrinking walls and the awful sound behind him, and tried to ignore the feel of the railing, still slick with the sweat of an entire city's hands.

A pair of figures crested the top stair. They stood side-by-side, silhouetted by the pale light behind them. They filled the width of the stairwell and began to descend towards him. He stood to the side, unsettled by their approach, to let them pass.

But when they were almost upon him, Philip recoiled in horror.

They were six or seven foot tall, coated in some foul black crude like thickened oil; it slowly rippled over their bodies, obscuring their

faces and mouths. It seemed to eat the light, and – like two black holes – reflected nothing under the orange glow.

Philip found the first stair behind him, and then the next, and soon scrambled back down them to the platform. He needed to escape from those barren faces and find his way free.

He turned the corner and there were more faceless shadows awaiting him. They grabbed his shoulders, black stuff swimming frantically over their hands, and touched his face. He felt numb instantly and his legs crumbled, dropping him to his knees. Philip's stomach constricted, muscles convulsing, lungs filling, and he coughed up a thick, viscous fluid. With a shudder, his gut exploded, and a torrent of black grease poured from him like blood, covering the ground. Dark figures stood around him, their faces a swirling mass, black sputum pooling at their feet, as one by one Philip's muscles failed. His whole body revolted, liquid spilling out, and he collapsed onto the drowned square tiles.

Slowly, the world stopped moving, and for a brief moment threatened to never resume.

Then, drop after drop, the congealed oil crept back towards Philip's lifeless body. It crawled onto his chest, into his hair, through his clothes. More followed, faster, coating his body in a layer of sludge, of bile, of everything that had filled him for so long. It covered him, flowing thick like a river across the surface of his cooling skin. Eddies swirled in his eyes, finding banks in the angles of his bones. It was a torrent flooding over him, a tumultuous sea, as silent as the shadows that looked on.

Eventually the waves subsided, and the liquid began to calmly move beneath the dull orange lights of the deserted subway platform, swirling in odd patterns.

Then, something stood, and one more shadow joined the night.

# LYNDA E. RUCKER

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## These Things We Have Always Known

LYNDA RUCKER CURRENTLY lives in Athens, Georgia in a rambling old house with her partner and lots of books, an overgrown yard, and one fussy cat imported from Ireland.

This is her third appearance in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*. Her fiction has also appeared in *Black Static* and *Supernatural Tales*, among other magazines, and she has a story in the forthcoming anthology *Apparitions*, due out from Screaming Dreams Press in 2010.

“On an afternoon break from one in a series of deadly dull office jobs I once held,” Rucker recalls, “this narrator’s voice stole into my head and started telling me about the very strange sort of work that he did and the even weirder place where he lived.

“I wrote it all down on a yellow legal pad (possibly pilfered from an office supply cabinet) and, consumed as I was at that time with that ‘anywhere-but-here’ feeling, I really did think that Cold Rest, creepy and apocalyptic as it was, seemed preferable to the place I found myself in that day.”

COLD REST IS THE NAME of this hard town scratched out on the side of a Georgia mountain ridge, so far to the north it’s bleeding over into North Carolina, really, although it doesn’t seem much to belong to either place. The people here have a certain way of talking, like you’ll find in isolated regions, the

kinds of places no one ever really leaves and that outsiders never move to, or even visit.

I have always known that there was something wrong in Cold Rest. People round here laugh when they say, something in the water, but it's true that the community my wife was raised in is not like other places. And there is a hardness about every single resident of Cold Rest – Sarah included – that is, in the end, like living alongside something rigid and alien. It hasn't been a perfect relationship; in twenty years we've had plenty of opportunity to hurt one another. I think Sarah still gets the occasional note or e-mail from the man she thought about leaving me for (though she never would have) five years ago. You learn to overlook these things. Here in Cold Rest, things are different, as I have said.

That something was always waiting in Cold Rest we all knew. You often had the feeling that you were in a room with someone, even when alone, who was getting ready to speak, making barely audible noises prior to forming actual words. You felt it sometimes like a seismic rumble deep in the earth. When you dreamed it you never could remember the following day, just a kind of uneasiness like something had crawled into your brain in the night and left the faintest of markings behind, a gloss of breath where your own thoughts used to lie.

"That one's lovely, Neil." Until Sarah spoke I didn't know she'd been watching me. She came forward and touched the robin I'd been carving as gently as if it had been alive. Dusk had descended while I was out there in my little workshop at the back of the house. I had lost track of time.

Sarah frowned when she saw what else I was working on, an abstract sculpture about half her height, rusted wire twisted into irregular angles broken by slivers of mirror. Everywhere that the robin whittled out of oak was warm and comforting, this seemed designed to inflict a kind of wound upon the observer. I worked on the robin when I got blocked on the other piece.

"I wish you'd just stick to carving birds and dogs like you used to," she said. "You never made anything like this before."

I just shrugged.

"Dinner's ready. And Gary's here."

That surprised me. I hadn't heard my brother's truck – though it's true that I sometimes get so engrossed in my work that I am not really aware of anything outside it – and Gary hadn't dropped in to see us

in a long time. He lived a couple of hours away, so it wasn't as though he'd just stop in casually.

I looked over the robin I'd been carving, ran one finger along its breast, felt something stirring. It seemed finished.

"What does he want?"

Sarah said, "I think he wants a job."

My brother's a writer – no, you probably haven't heard of him; when he tells people the names he writes under you can see them being sorry they've asked, anxious in case it turns out the names *ought* to ring a bell.

Gary prefers to think of himself as a regular guy. I know because he's told me so many times. He writes horror, thrillers, crime, whatever he can get paid for – Sarah says a romance novel here and there, though he's never admitted it to *me* – and that seems all right to him because it's regular-guy fiction.

We were sitting down to dinner, the four of us – our teenaged daughter Emma crept out of her room and joined us – and I said it outright. "I don't know, Gary. I mean, I'm sure I could get you on at the yard, but why in hell you want to go and do something like get a job? And why here?"

Gary looked at his food and mumbled. "Headaches. I've been getting these damn fierce headaches. I don't have any health plan and I'm scared to see a doctor. Something's really wrong, I could be paying them off for the rest of my life."

There was a silence round the table, except for the sound of Emma's chewing with her mouth open.

Gary tried to laugh. "Thought I'd try to get me some of that sick leave you working folks are always talking about. Imagine getting paid to lie in bed all day and puke!"

I said, "It doesn't really work that way," but Sarah cut me off with a look.

"Besides," Gary went on, "the things that go on here sometimes with those carvings you do, I figure maybe I could use a jolt of that for my books."

Sarah said, "It doesn't happen the way you tell it to, Gary. Neil's carvings come to life under his hands sometimes, but it's not anything he can control. You can't use it for your own purposes."

When Sarah says *come to life* you understand that she is not speaking figuratively. I have told that you Cold Rest is not like other places.

"Well," Gary said, "I'd sure like a chance to try."

Sarah changed the subject. "How's Barbara?" she asked, referring to Gary's long-time, on-again off-again girlfriend.

"She got married last month."

Emma scraped her chair back and announced that she was going out. Her hair was black as pitch that night and falling across her face. The week before it was emergency-red. It was as though someone different sat down to dinner with us every few nights, although even without the outlandish hair I felt like I didn't know her any longer. She's grown so tall in the last couple of years, and her hands are long and delicate, pianist's hands, except she hasn't touched Sarah's grandmother's baby grand in the living room since she reached her teens. She has dark eyes and her mouth is sulky, at least around Sarah and me. Sarah said she was sure Emma and her boyfriend were having sex, but that she didn't know what to do about it. I said, I'm sure you'll handle it, because I didn't even want to think of it, and I didn't know why we had to *do* anything. That boyfriend of hers, Sam or Simon . . . What kind of a name is Simon anyway? I tried not to look at him when he came to visit. He had soft, puffy hands. I imagined saying something to him like, "You'd better not touch my daughter with those hands!" fully realizing how ridiculous that made me. I said to Sarah, "For God's sake, she's only sixteen years old," and she said, "But don't you remember sixteen? She seems like a baby to us but at sixteen you think you're all finished growing up."

But. Sixteen! She still looked like a child.

"I'll see what I can do for you," I said to Gary. "You can stay here if you need to. There's not much in town in the way of rentals."

"Why don't you take Gary out to your shop and show him what you've been working on?" Sarah suggested. "Maybe he'll like them better than I do."

Gary always feigned, or perhaps genuinely felt, a polite interest in even my most banal creations. We walked out there while Sarah was brewing coffee. Evenings in Cold Rest are beautiful. There's a special way the sun slips down the mountain and leaves everything glowing. Tonight we were just in time to see the sky deepen and blaze in all its twilight glory. I dragged a couple of the things I'd been working on out of my shop, because I'd noticed that when the light was right – at about that time of day – the metal I was using glowed like it was plugged into an electrical outlet.

Gary didn't touch any of it like he usually does. He stood back a bit and pointed at one of them. "What's going on there?" he asked.

I had stretched and hammered torn strips of canvas across an irregularly shaped cage I'd built, and along the sides threaded teeth from the skulls of dead animals I'd come across in the woods.

"I don't know," I said. "I just felt like it had to look that way."

Gary didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, "I don't like it."

That shocked me, and it hurt a little. Gary always liked what I did. He was younger than me, but I treated him more like an older brother, anxious for his approval. I'd never been real proud of my woodworking before, mediocre stuff I could've sold at inflated prices in some of the tourist towns to folks who didn't know any better. For the first time, making these sculptures that came to me in dreams, I felt like I was doing something that mattered.

"I think you ought to get rid of them and go back to making birds and baby rabbits, even if some of them do get away from you," he said, and then he was heading for his truck just like he hadn't said he was going to sit a while and have coffee with Sarah and me, and she came out the back door when she heard his engine and looked at me with a question in her eyes. Had we argued? I shook my head, to show her I didn't know.

The following evening, when I got out to the shop after work, I found the robin with its neck broken. I'd forgotten to set it outside before I closed up for the night, and it had flown repeatedly against the windows.

I cradled it in my palms and carried it in to show to Sarah and Emma. I felt so bad, like I'd taken it up in my own two hands and dashed it against the wall. Like I'd created something just so it could suffer and die. We buried it in the backyard because it didn't seem right to just throw it out, and Emma set a little ring of stones round its grave.

Sarah teaches English at the local junior high school in town. At night sometimes, to help me unwind, she reads me poems. I like the ones that rhyme. I know that's not very sophisticated of me, but there it is. My favourite poet is Robert Frost. Emma said, "Sean (or Stan, or Steve, or whatever his name is) is a poet and he said Robert Frost was supposed to have been a real dick." Sarah said, "Emma!" and Emma said, "What? I'm just saying," and I didn't say anything at all. Instead I repeated lines of poetry to myself. I like the one about miles to go before I sleep.

Sarah had Emma's boyfriend in her class a few years ago. She said he "had quite a way with words for such a young person". This made me feel like she was taking sides with Emma and that boy, against

me. Sarah writes poetry, just for herself. Once in a while she'll read one to me. They don't rhyme, and I don't understand them, although I pretend like I do. I think this is one of the things she liked about the man she had the affair with. He was a poet of moderate renown – if you move in those circles, which I don't; I took Sarah's word for it – and she met him when she taught in a special program down south for gifted children a few summers ago. I remember how she was for a while afterwards. Not better, not worse, just a different Sarah; their intimacy drew out dormant parts I'd not known in her. She used words and turns of phrases she hadn't before. Her mind strayed to subjects I was unaccustomed to. They weren't his words, his subjects. They belonged to Sarah, but it was all hidden geography in the context of *our* relationship.

Maybe that was why she and Gary didn't like what I was working on. Maybe it was as simple as that, the unaccustomedness, the fact that they were used to seeing me work with wood and blade to make cosy scenes like fox families or spring fawns. I told myself that while she read to me that night by the fire, got lost in the words she was speaking till I fell asleep dreaming of the bird pitching itself against the glass, trying to get free, until it shattered the bones in its neck, and she had to wake me to send me to bed.

I knew that Emma was gone almost before she actually left. I thought afterwards about that word – *almost* – such a little word, six letters and the difference between what was and what might have been. I woke covered in a bad dream, and I felt something wrong in the night. Something gone out of the house. Later, when I talked to Sarah about it, she said I must have woken up earlier, unknowing, when Emma closed the front door, or heard the engine of whatever car swept her into the night and away from us. I told her she must be right. But I knew what woke me was the simple fact of her absence, unnatural and complete. The house fairly vibrated with the lack of her. Had I known, in my dreams, that she was going? Had I let her go, to find out how far away she could get?

I was right all along not to trust that boy.

The week after Gary came to dinner – before Emma had left us – he accompanied me to the yard for the first time. I showed him round a little bit, and he went to talk to Human Resources, a phrase which has always had a little too literal a turn to it for my liking.

Gary talked a good game about honest manual labour but he's never been the type to break a sweat, and I knew he'd wind up taking a position in the office. I can't blame him for that. It gets unbearably hot in the yard in summer, and in the winter the ground freezes hard. I've seen folks felled by heat stroke and frostbite and worse things, because of what it is we're digging out of the ground there. And we sink mine shafts deep into the earth, even though it's getting harder to find people willing to go under the ground like that. Mostly just the old-timers'll take that kind of work.

Gary moved into our spare room, and he got up and went to work every day, and locked himself away when he came home, only venturing out for dinner. I figured he must be getting a lot of writing done. It got so we were seeing more of Emma than him, and that's saying something. I didn't pay him much attention, to be honest, because I'd been dreaming again about what I wanted to work on next, and the dreams were strange and left me with a taste in my mouth like cold metal. I didn't have clear pictures in my head of the devices I needed to build next, but the designs seemed etched into the movement of my hands.

And then Emma was gone, and the work was all that could soothe me, take my head somewhere it wasn't worried sick about what was happening to her. The police said they'd do all they could, and none of her friends knew a thing. Sean's – or Seth's – or Sam's mother visited Sarah one day; I couldn't bear to be around her, a wan, ineffectual woman. I headed out to the shop.

After a while Gary joined me. I was painting sheets of tin in coat after coat of black paint. I wanted to get a deeper black than I'd ever seen in nature. I asked Gary if he thought it was working. He didn't answer me.

"How are things going?" I said. "You seem pretty busy."

He shrugged and wouldn't look at me. "I've been writing," he said, "but when I get back and look at the pages, I don't remember putting down what I see there, and what I see scares me."

"What do they have you doing in the office there?" I was curious; there was no mixing between the blue- and white-collar folks at the yard.

"I print reports and collate them, and compare long lists of figures with other long lists, but listen to this, after I get far enough down the lists they stop being numbers and they start being other kinds of marks, things I've never seen before. Also, I write letters for some of the executives. I wrote down the names of some of the places they were being sent to, places I never heard of, but when I looked them

up later I could never find any of them." His face looked clammy and pale when he was telling me this.

"You made an appointment to see a doctor about those headaches yet? I know one in town'd see you."

He shook his head. "I don't think this has anything to do with those headaches."

"Still." I had a feeling Gary'd come to us because he was at the end of his rope, that it had been more than headaches and fear of skyrocketing medical bills that had driven him. I didn't know how to ask him if he had any money at all, but I didn't need to; knowing Gary, he'd have offered to pay us for room and board if he'd been able.

"Listen, Neil, I got to ask you something that sounds crazy. Do you ever think maybe you wind up in a place and everything in your life has been about moving you to that moment, preparing you for something momentous even? Like your life's work?"

"I hope you're not talking about Cold Rest. Anything moving you toward something here can't be good."

"Why'd you stay?"

"Why do people stay anywhere? My family's here."

"Why do *they* stay?"

*They don't*, I wanted to say, but I couldn't think that way. Emma would come back to us. It was simply not possible to acknowledge any other outcome. "It's different for folks born here."

Gary put his hand out to touch the piece I was working on. "Careful," I said, "wet paint," but wet paint or no, I didn't want anyone touching those structures but me.

"What are they?"

"Instruments," I said. "Instruments for the summoning of dead races."

"The hell's that supposed to mean? That sounds fucked up."

"It came to me. In a dream. I thought about trying to put on some kind of show, you know, like a real artist, and I pictured that title printed up on little cards and hanging above them."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"In a way, I don't either. Anyway, I'd have to hold it out here in the shop. Cold Rest isn't much for art exhibitions."

Gary reached in his shirt pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes.

"I thought you quit."

"I did." He lit one, took a long drag, staring off into the woods, and said, "I think we ought to go look for Emma."

"Where would we start?"

"You don't want her to come back here, do you?"

I said, "I miss her so much sometimes I can't breathe."

Gary watched me for a while. "Over at the yard, Neil, who runs that place?"

"Nowadays," I said, "Bree Cold and her brother Ambrose. He's kind of a half-wit, though. The Colds always ran it. Town wouldn't be here without the company. They came here from – well, hell, nobody knows where, but they started it up during the Depression, and people came from all over that couldn't get work anywhere else."

"What goes on there? What are y'all digging out of the ground all day?"

"What are you pushing papers round the office for?"

Gary finished his cigarette and lit another one off that. "I don't know," he said. "I got some ideas. I think it's time I cut my losses and hit the road, but there's something I haven't told you and Sarah."

"You don't owe us any explanations."

"That last book, though, it sort of tanked. They've been doing that for a while, actually."

"Well." I put down my paintbrush. I wondered if he was going to try to borrow some money; we didn't have anything to give him. "It's not all bad here. Sarah says at least in Cold Rest we can get at the edges of something miraculous." *The price of living is dying*, Sarah had told me, *and even when Cold Rest has swallowed up the last of you whole you know you've been in the presence of something divine.*

"Something miraculous," Gary said. "Is that how she sees it?"

Emma called us last night.

Her voice sounded so far away on the telephone. Sarah started crying. She asked Emma if she needed anything, if we could send her money, if there was anything at all she'd let us do. Emma said no. She just wanted to let us know she was all right.

"Baby, sooner or later you'll have to come home," Sarah said, but Emma had already hung up.

I couldn't sleep after that; I'd be dropping off and I'd think I heard her voice. Then a storm moved over us, thunder and lightning and wind to wake the dead. I got up and prowled around for a while, looking out the windows like I was waiting for something, and finally I braved the torrent of rain to make a sprint out to my workshop. I tried to work on a new piece. Sarah had stopped going out there at all. She said it upset her stomach to see the things I was

making nowadays. She said she couldn't even look at them, that she had to look *around* them, because they just seemed like objects gone wrong somehow.

It occurred to me while I was out there hammering bits of bone I'd salvaged from carcasses of deer and dead birds – filthy work – that I could do the kind of thing a decent man would never do. I could leave. I could just disappear and put Cold Rest behind me. I could make the last twenty years of my life vanish just like that. Start anew. I was still young enough to have another family even.

At the same time I had a funny feeling I'd missed the chance to do anything like that, that whatever was set in motion couldn't be stopped any longer.

We have always known in Cold Rest that we were waiting on something. We didn't know what, or if we'd see it in our lifetimes, but without ever talking about it among ourselves we all knew we were preparing for something bigger than any of us could conceive.

There is not much of a social life in Cold Rest except among the teenagers. Sarah and I had never had any real friends. I wondered what kind of devices other people were constructing behind the walls of their homes. I wondered what kind of poems Sarah was writing that she wasn't showing to me.

Gary found me in my workshop just as dawn was breaking. The storm had blown over but the sky had a tattered look about.

"I got the truck all loaded," he said. "I'm taking off. Sure you don't want to join me?"

I said, "I don't think it would do me any good." And, "What about your headaches?"

His eyes, I realized with a shock, were bright with tears. "I tell you," he said. "I've been scared shitless all along it's a brain tumour. I think something's bad wrong. I just want to get somewhere bright and warm. Thinking of heading down to Tybee Island. Remember, when we were kids?"

Laughing like fools splashing into waves big as houses. Crab legs at the restaurant with the red and white checkered oilcloth where you threw the shells into a hole in the middle of the table. The 178 steps to the top of the old lighthouse and the rumours of pirate gold.

I had a couple of twenties on me, but he wouldn't take them. "I just want to sit on the beach and take it all in," he said. "I don't think I'll need that."

"For gas money, then," I said. It seemed important that I try to do something for him. I watched him leave, his taillights disappearing

down the driveway, and then I turned back to my sculptures. In the gathering morning light they glowed and seemed to sing to me.

Sarah was fixing breakfast when I went in, pancakes and sausage. "Gary left," she said, not a question. I nodded anyway and helped myself to some coffee. The clock above the sink that played Westminster chimes on the hour struck, and went on striking, and both of us counting and trying to look like we weren't. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.

"Goodness, that was strange," Sarah said when it finished, with a nervous laugh.

I have never tasted a meal less than I did that breakfast.

I looked out the window toward my workshop, and I kept seeing things. Holes in my vision like Sarah describes when she gets one of her migraines, only my head felt fine. I think I said I better head on to work. Sarah looked anxious and said, did I have to go?

Once I turned onto the main road through town I saw I might not get far. The storm had been worse up that way; tree limbs torn and blown into the road, pieces of asphalt chunked into rubble like there'd been an earthquake. It was still passable, barely, but I couldn't see any reason to pass. I turned around and headed back home.

Only now I'm here and Sarah's gone. I've called her name, and I've gone looking for her, and her cup of coffee is half-drunk and still on the table where she was sitting when I left. I tell myself she went on to work, too, but there's only one road into town and I didn't pass her on my way back. I don't dare look in the garage because I don't want to see her car there. I don't dare leave the house now, in fact, or even look out the windows.

It has gone blacker than night outside, although I believe it is about eleven in the morning; I cannot be sure because my watch has begun running in reverse and the clock is chiming weird hours at uncertain intervals. A little while ago there was a splitting sound, and I heard things scuttling and then swarming the sides of the house; it is only a matter of time now before what is out there gets in. We have always known there was something hidden in Cold Rest, something murmuring in a pitch not known to us, something waiting just outside our field of vision. We have obliged it with our reticent ways; we have nurtured it in our guarded, secret souls; we have made it potent with our lies; and now it is upon us all, all of us dreamers, whispering of promises we didn't mean to make, and cold as the stars.